

# Strategy Research Project International Fellow

## Implementing New Strategy in Combat: Ira C. Eaker 1942-1943

by

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United States Army War College  
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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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IRA C. EAKER 1942-1943**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Most strategies have to be proven in combat. And more often than not, these strategies do not survive the realities of contact with the enemy. How do strategic leaders deal with this? What is their role in implementing the strategy and when do they face the inevitable and adapt their original strategy?

A vital component of the United States' strategy at the outbreak of World War II was a bombing offensive against Germany. It was assumed that unescorted but heavily armed bombers could find their way to specific industrial targets, and could bomb these with great accuracy. However, in 1943 this strategy was proven to be untenable. With rapid adaptations not only to its strategy but also within its operational and tactical domains, the Eighth Air Force overcame the problems, managed to continue its daylight campaign and achieved success. This paper will look at the leadership displayed at the strategic level by Brigadier General Ira C. Eaker during the vital first eighteen months of combat operations. It will examine the agility and adaptability of Eaker and his organization as they gained experience and will focus on Eaker's prime areas of interest: leadership, public relations and the availability of resources.





## IMPLEMENTING NEW STRATEGY IN COMBAT: IRA C. EAKER 1942-1943

It is now generally accepted that the efforts of the U.S. Eighth Army Air Force contributed in important ways to the victory over Germany in World War II. In particular the Eighth Air Force helped to achieve air superiority over Europe, enabling the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944, and opened Germany to devastating air attacks that ultimately crippled its ability to move industrial materials and to fight a war of maneuver.<sup>1</sup> The Eighth Air Force entered the European theatre in 1942 with a strategy that assumed unescorted but heavily-armed bombers could find their way to specific industrial targets, and could bomb these with great accuracy. However, in 1943 this strategy was proven to be untenable. With rapid adaptations not only to its strategy but also within its operational and tactical domains, the Eighth Air Force overcame the problems, managed to continue its daylight campaign and achieved success. This paper will look at the leadership displayed at the strategic level by Brigadier General Ira C. Eaker during the vital first eighteen months of combat operations. It will examine the agility and adaptability of Eaker and his organization as they gained experience, and it will focus on Eaker's prime areas of interest: leadership, public relations and the availability of resources.<sup>2</sup>

### 1942: the Year of Trial

Eaker received his orders on January 31, 1942. He was selected as "Bomber Commander Army Air Forces in Great Britain" and had among other duties "to understudy British Bomber Command Headquarters and make the necessary preparation to insure competent and aggressive command and direction of our bomber units in England." <sup>3</sup> A very intensive period for Eaker and his small staff followed,

culminating in the arrival of the 97th Bomb Group and the 1st Fighter Group in July.

Eaker was now about to wage a whole new type of warfare based on a body of largely untested assumptions.

The overall aerial strategy was set out in AWPD-1, which contained timing and targeting and details on production, manpower, organization, support and basing.<sup>4</sup> With the strategic objective “to defeat Germany (and her Allies)” the task of the Army Air Force was “to destroy the industrial war making capacity of Germany, restrict Axis air operations and to permit and support a final invasion of Germany.” In all, 154 targets had to be destroyed, which would disrupt Germany’s electric power supply and transportation system and destroy its synthetic petroleum, aluminum and magnesium production and airplane assembly plants. A total of 6,834 bombers were required “in a six month period that weather conditions favored operations over Europe.” It was all based on the theory that U.S. bombers would be able to reach their targets in daylight without prohibitive losses. Fighter aircraft received a low production priority in AWPD-1 and were relegated to the role of “limited area defense and to defend bombardment bases.”<sup>5</sup>

The American strategy met British skepticism. In 1939, the Royal Air Force (R.A.F.) had attempted daylight bombing, but was soon confronted with prohibitive losses and reverted to bombing at night. But night bombing meant reduced accuracy. Thus the R.A.F. area bombing strategy was born. It was the fervent wish of the British, and especially Prime Minister Winston Churchill, that the Americans now joined in that effort. But the Americans were fully committed to their own strategy and they declined.<sup>6</sup>

On August 17, 1942 the strategy outlined in AWPDP-1 was put to its first operational test when the 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, escorted by R.A.F. Spitfires, bombed marshalling yards in Rouen. Eaker flew in one of the B-17's and witnessed a reasonably effective strike and the return of all twelve bombers. In a lengthy report he noted: "there is reason to believe that our high level bombing can and will be sufficiently accurate for the destruction of small point targets." But, he cautioned: "it is too early in our experiments in actual operations to say that it can definitely make deep penetrations without fighter escort and without excessive losses." Regarding the B-17 he remarked: "I feel that we should be able to demonstrate in this theatre ..... that these bombers, with good crews, can take care of themselves and blast enemy installations with great accuracy." <sup>7</sup> A week later, after five more missions, he was very explicit when writing to the Chief of the Army Air Force, General Henry Arnold, in Washington<sup>8</sup>: "I think we have already demonstrated two things. One, that we can do high level accurate bombing when the weather permits. And two, that the B-17 can be flown over enemy territory without excessive losses, with such fighter cover as is available."

Upon request from President Roosevelt, AWPDP-1 was updated, and a new AWPDP-42 was presented on September 9. It basically reaffirmed the strategy as outlined a year earlier in AWPDP-1.<sup>9</sup> In the list of priorities, the destruction of the German Air Force had climbed to first place. But the most important change that could have been made, namely to increase the required amount of fighters and to acknowledge their role as bomber escorts, was not made. AWPDP-42 explicitly stated that "with our present types of well armed and armored bombers, and through skillful employment of great masses, it is possible to penetrate the known and projected defenses of Europe

and the Far East without reaching a loss-rate which would prevent our waging a sustained offensive.”<sup>10</sup> This was no doubt based on the optimistic reports that Eaker had sent from England at that same time. But AWPD-42 also revealed evidence of lingering worries that “initial losses may well be heavy and apparently prohibitive.”<sup>11</sup>

Soon more units arrived in England and the scale of operations intensified; a raid on October 9 involved more than 100 B-17's and B-24's.<sup>12</sup> By now, some significant issues arose and required action from Eaker. One of the most important was the quality of training that crews received before going overseas. With the pace that the buildup of forces required, training in the U.S. was brief and was hampered by the lack of facilities and equipment. In addition European weather conditions were far different than those at U.S. training stations. Colonel Curtis LeMay, commanding the 305<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group which arrived in England in September 1942, wrote in January 1943 to General Robert Olds of Training Command in the U.S.: “Most of the training that we consider essential for operations in the European theatre, the pilots never received at all, because there wasn't time.”<sup>13</sup> Eaker initiated a number of actions. One of the most drastic was the temporary removal from combat operations of most of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Group in September 1942, turning its base and much of its personnel into a “Combat Crew Replacement Centre”. Here all replacement crews and new Groups arriving would receive additional training and adaptation to the European theatre. Also, special gunnery and bombing ranges were opened.<sup>14</sup>

Another issue was the increasing number of losses. On September 6, 1942 the first two B-17's were lost in combat. As the Luftwaffe pilots became more familiar with their new opponents, they found that the B-17 was relatively vulnerable to frontal

attacks. The concept of the unescorted bomber was severely put to the test over the coming months, with losses mounting. Immediate modifications were made to the bombers, including a version with a “chin turret” with two .50 caliber machineguns. But it would take many months before the first up-gunned B-17G type bombers would arrive in England.<sup>15</sup>

Bombing results, also, often fell short of expectations. Besides the obvious problems with the European weather, evasive action to flak and fighters and the individual sighting operation by each bombardier were the main reasons. After considerable discussion it was decided to significantly adapt operational procedures including utilization of a new “staggered” formation; elimination of evasive action on the bomb run, and simultaneous bomb release on a signal from a single lead bombardier. In addition, the first tests with “blind bombing techniques” were performed, inspired by the performance of the R.A.F. It was a major threat to the “precision” aspect of the U.S. daylight bombing campaign, but was forced by the need to maintain a reasonable operational tempo despite the frequent cloud cover over Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the greatest threat to the concept of daylight bombing, however, was the diversion of units to other theatres. Arnold wrote to Eaker in late December: “We have a tremendous job ahead of us but I think that everything is rounding out in such a way that we will be able to put it across.”<sup>17</sup> But there was continuous pressure on the forces destined for his command. The R.A.F. requested American aircraft and the Navy wanted B-24 units for anti-submarine patrols and duty in the Pacific. Most importantly though, the North African campaign (where operation “Torch” was launched and the Twelfth Air Force was established) was sapping the strength of the Eighth Air Force.<sup>18</sup>

Eaker lost his two most experienced Bomb Groups and two Fighter Groups in 1942, and that process would continue in 1943. Eaker himself stated to Arnold on January 11, 1943 that: "Since the African campaign is not directly aimed at Germany and her munitions industry, it must be classed as a diversion". He added "It seems to me that we must re-examine all our tactics and at once concentrate on all those things which are purely offensive. The offensive should be aimed at the one point where it will be critical, namely, German industry inside Germany." In that same letter Eaker rebutted Arnold's concerns about high losses on two recent missions, but for the first time mentioned the importance of fighter escort:

.... Our second recourse is to have our fighters accompany our bombers all the way to the target and back again. We have the 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, which, by the 15<sup>th</sup> of this month will have its 80 P-38's..... The P-38 is a much better airplane than has been generally presumed, and I feel quite certain that 50 or 60 of these fighters riding above our bombers will do much to prevent the combined and concentrated attacks which heretofore have been made on our bombers over the submarine bases when no friendly fighters were present. I believe that the very presence of these American fighters will reduce our bomber losses by more than 50 %.<sup>19</sup>

This somewhat hidden passage in the letter was significant; it underlined that the fundamental trust that the leaders of the Eighth Air Force had in the concept of the unescorted bomber was now slowly eroding. Almost tacitly the "escort fighter" was introduced as a necessary means to be able to reach the strategic objective: the German industry.

### 1943: the Year of Truth

Eaker was invited to participate in the Allied conference in Casablanca in January 1943. Here he was instrumental in quelling the doubts that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill still had about the U.S. daylight bombing campaign and in getting his plan for a "Combined Bomber Offensive" accepted. The plan basically

confirmed that the Allies 'agreed to disagree' on whether bombing by night or by day was the most feasible. It was fully in the spirit of AWPD-1, but now clearly acknowledged that a ground invasion in Europe was required. The plan was formally presented on April 13, 1943.<sup>20</sup> Notably, it stressed that "if the growth of the German fighter strength is not arrested quickly, it may become literally impossible to carry out the destruction planned and thus to create the conditions necessary for the ultimate decisive action by our combined forces on the continent."<sup>21</sup> Eaker was thus convinced that arresting German fighter expansion had to be his first priority.

Eaker's high spirits after Casablanca were bolstered by the first U.S. mission to Germany on January 27, 1943. Fifty-eight B-17s dropped their loads on the submarine-building facilities at Vegesack, undisturbed by the Luftwaffe. Although only 'fair' bombing results were obtained, the symbolic value was enormous and raised the morale of the air crews. At the same time, the attrition to the North African theatre continued and had severe repercussions. Eaker wrote to Arnold on January 30 that "it was a terrible blow to lose the P-38's, the 78<sup>th</sup> Group would have been going with our bombers by the 1<sup>st</sup> of February. That decision is going to mean the loss of many bombers and their fine crews."<sup>22</sup>

Only two weeks later, Eaker, who had just learned that he had lost another two B-17 replacement Groups to the North African theatre, had to write to Arnold that "we have not, during the last three weeks, been able to show a continuity of operations." The weather was the predominant factor now and Eaker compared his force with the R.A.F. "Another reason why we do not have the R.A.F. versatility is because we cannot bomb at night. We expect to be able to do night bombing when the weather is better at

night in the near future.” In the same letter he referred to the P-47, “we estimate that the Eagle Squadron [4<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group] and the 56<sup>th</sup> Group will be accompanying our bombers by March 15.....The full tactical use of it depends to a considerable degree on how fast you can furnish us long range tanks.” He closed off with, “do what you can to prevent the other Air Forces from stealing all our planes and pilots and remember that we are going to give a merry ride to those you succeed in sending here.” <sup>23</sup>

The night bombing experiment was short lived as the American bombers needed significant modifications for night operations and its crews were not trained for them. A Squadron that had been converted later became a “night leaflet squadron”, dropping propaganda over the continent. A B-24 Group was later dedicated to special operations duties and also operated primarily at night. The experiment shows, however, that in the spring and summer of 1943 the Americans were willing to consider other options besides daylight bombing alone. The “merry ride” that Eaker mentioned, were somewhat ironic in light of the severe losses that were suffered. On April 4, 1943 LeMay’s 305<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group led three other Groups to Billancourt in France. Its report reflected the state of mind at the operational units:

.... The fact that this Group was prepared for these attacks, particularly in the Low Squadron which had four aircraft with twin nose guns and yet lost three aircraft from that squadron, indicate that if these attacks continue either the lead group must have a large percentage of nose guns or preferably that we must have fighter support throughout the mission. These attacks will definitely have some effect on the morale of the leading group. <sup>24</sup>

The demand for fighters at the tactical level was obvious and combat crew morale was one of the gravest concerns that Eaker had to handle. Writing to Major General Davenport Johnson in the U.S. on April 21, he set out his views on leadership:



I cannot tell you too strongly or urgently, the importance of the group commander in this battle. Invariably good group commanders have good groups, and mediocre group commanders have mediocre groups. There is no exception. I hope I can impress upon you the great urgency of supreme care in picking group commanders. I make this point so strongly because I, myself, did not realize how important it was. I knew it was important, but I did not know it was all important. We have had to relieve several group commanders and we are going to relieve others.

Eaker then summed up the desired and required qualities of a good group commander:

Personal integrity, courage and tough fibre; an ability to inspire the will to fight in his squadron leaders and combat crews; his freedom from discouragement, an officer who does not lose his smile and his even good temper in times of great stress; one who never shows any evidence of indecision, fright or excessive worry; physical fitness; a cooperative personality, one who will carry out orders willingly and promptly.<sup>25</sup>

Eaker, realizing that he was setting a high standard, then added “you can clearly see that I have depicted above the type of individuals who are scarce indeed.....It is that tiny little handful of human beings that we are looking for.” And, three months later, when writing to Arnold about one of that ‘handful’ who was lost leading his Fighter Group over Holland, Eaker remarked that, “the Air Force of ours has, in my opinion, been most fortunate in that its commanders were willing to go to the fight with their combat crews.” He added “I think the few leaders we have lost have paid their way in the gang by the morale they have raised in their subordinates, and the example they have set for those who are left behind.”<sup>26</sup>

Eaker did not hesitate to relieve commanders or to judge them harshly. Two of these were Colonels Frank Robinson and Charles Overacker of the 44th and the 306th Bomb Group respectively. Upon their return to Washington, they made negative statements. When confronted with these, Eaker told Arnold “I think we must look upon these as isolated cases of sick men – men who did not have the stamina for the

hardships and rigours of war, and who are broken mentally by the experience. I am delighted to tell you that they are isolated cases. The great majority of our group leaders are standing up well and doing magnificent work.”<sup>27</sup> General Arnold in Washington was under enormous pressure to validate all the resources that had been invested over the last two years in the buildup of the Army Air Forces campaign, he wanted to be able to show results. The pressure regularly flared up in the correspondence between Arnold and Eaker. On June 10 Arnold sent a sharply-voiced cable to Eaker about the ratio between the available aircraft and crew and those who were actually flying missions.<sup>28</sup> Arnold followed it five days later with another pointed critique:

All reports I have received have admitted that your maintenance over there is not satisfactory and yet you have not taken any steps to recommend removal of those responsible, nor have you attempted to put in men who can do the job. If your maintenance is unsatisfactory now with only a small number of airplanes, what will it be when you have much larger numbers? ..... I am willing to do anything possible to build up your forces but you must play your part. My wire was sent to you to toughen up – to can these fellows who cannot produce – to put in youngsters who can carry the ball.... This is a long letter but I am writing it because I want you to come out of this as a real commander. You have performed an excellent job but there are times when you will have to be tough – so be tough when it is necessary and pass out the bouquets when they should be passed out.<sup>29</sup>

Eaker stood his ground; he defended his Eighth Air Force Air Service Commander who was responsible for the maintenance that was so severely criticized by Arnold: “Miller has shown much more energy, much greater attention to duty and a better appreciation of the task during the last month than he has at any earlier time. His personal habits and his relation toward me and the job have been exemplary.”<sup>30</sup> And on August 23 he noted “our combat crews know that they are in a tough fight against a determined, losing and sometimes fanatical enemy, but due to the excellence of their

aircraft and their fine training they can overcome him. My problem is to keep their leadership sound and I work unceasingly at that.”<sup>31</sup>

Eaker worked hard to retain public support and to bolster crew morale through an emphasis on ‘public relations’ for his Eighth Air Force. Articles appeared in high profile magazines in the United States and England (crewmembers graced the cover of *Life* magazine in July 1943; Eaker was himself on the cover of *Time* magazine a month later). A special ‘one year anniversary’ book (*Target Germany*) was published that same month. Several films highlighted the contributions of the bombers, including *Combat America* (with Clark Gable starring) in 1943, and *Memphis Belle* by director William Wyler in early 1944. Press releases on the results of the bombing campaign were constantly issued, and the men of the Eighth Air Force figured prominently in the headlines of newspapers at home. After three of his Groups had been temporarily detached to North Africa and executed a low-level mission to the refineries in Ploesti, he complained: “I think it was very bad not to give our units any credit in the reports and in the press, since 75 % of the effort which was achieved was accomplished by our Groups. It is very difficult to maintain morale when this sort of thing happens.”<sup>32</sup>

The spring and summer of 1943 were critical for the concept of daylight operations. Heavy losses, such as ten B-17’s lost by a single Group on April 17 and 26 B-17’s lost on a mission to Bremen on June 13, dampened spirits. Successful strikes, such as the one on June 22 on the rubber factory in Huls, raised them again. More and better trained Bomb and Fighter Groups arrived in England. Also, P-38 and P-47 fighters received ‘drop tanks’ which extended their range considerably; on July 30 they were able to escort the bombers to the north of the Ruhr.

But Eaker had to contend with other issues as well. “Collateral damage” of bombs dropped by his forces killed thousands of civilians in the occupied countries, as in Antwerp on April 5 and in Amsterdam on July 17. This caused political turmoil, with the governments in exile complaining; the Germans were handed an excellent opportunity to exploit the Army Air Forces mishaps. Eaker sternly reinstated his instructions “to make certain that there will be no future demonstrations of the inaccurate and promiscuous bombing which occurred in the Fokker aircraft factory attack at Amsterdam.” <sup>33</sup>

The continuous pressure on his available resources continued, and Eaker was forced to write to Arnold again and plead for the retention of his medium Bomb Groups. He had already (albeit temporarily) lost his three B-24 Groups to the Ninth Air Force.<sup>34</sup> On July 18th he reemphasized the necessity of destroying what he deemed “the principal means he [Germany] has for stopping our bombers, namely his fighter force”. He asked Arnold to personally consider the advisability of destroying two specific targets according to a plan he had sent back with General Haywood Hansell to Washington “as nothing that we can do is as important as destroying German aviation. It will be absolutely impossible to execute a successful invasion next year unless we break up the German air force.” <sup>35</sup> He also stressed the importance of getting his B-24 Groups back shortly. Unfortunately for Eaker, his advice was ignored. On August 1 a major attack on the oil refineries in Ploesti was launched; Eaker would get his three badly-mauled Groups back in late August, only to have them dispatched again to North-Africa to help out in the Italian campaign for several weeks.<sup>36</sup>

In July 1943 Brigadier General Haywood Hansell, one of the planners involved in writing both AWPD-1 and AWPD-42, and who after that commanded a Combat Wing in the Eighth Air Force, returned to Washington. He, as no other, was intimately familiar with the idea behind the original strategy and the difficulties now experienced in executing it. He was interviewed by the Intelligence Section of the Air Staff on August 9 and stated that “the opposition that has been developing through these raids has been going very fast and has reached a greater intensity than last year. However, it now seems to be tapering off that level. So far, we think we have enough equipment, enough tactics, and enough procedure to penetrate that opposition without excessive losses.”<sup>37</sup> In view of things that would come in just over a week, it was a remarkable case of wishful thinking. Questioned if the apparent heavier armament of German fighters was to be met by greater caliber guns on the B-17’s or by building accompanying fighters, Hansell replied: “I think the desirability of answers is, fighters first, guns second.” And then he added, “there was never any question in the mind of any combat crew member here but that he would like to have accompanying fighters. Nobody was standing on his pride and saying that we could get along without them, because it meant all the difference in the world: when the fighters were along, the mission was going to be relatively easy. When they weren’t along, it was tough.”<sup>38</sup>

Hansell’s words perfectly underline the change that occurred in the thinking of the original planners over the year of operations, which originally relegated fighters to protection of the home bases. They were prophetic words at the same time. The plan that he had personally carried from Eaker to Arnold entailed a double strike against a ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt and an aircraft factory in Regensburg on the first

anniversary of the Eighth Air Forces' operations over Europe, August 17. An epic air battle was fought that day, mostly out of reach of friendly fighters; no less than 60 B-17s were lost, and many more were damaged.<sup>39</sup> Bombing results were quite good, especially at Regensburg, which somewhat eased the message about the losses to the American public.

By this time, Arnold realized that he “had been receiving reports, letters and telegrams from overseas, and verbal accounts from returning officers that made it apparent that I was getting out of touch with the Eighth Air Force”.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, he travelled to England and visited both staffs and operational units. While he was there a disastrous mission to Stuttgart was flown on September 6, with the loss of 45 B-17s. The losses were due less to enemy fighters than to weather conditions, human error and fuel shortage.<sup>41</sup> Obviously feeling that the matter was so urgent he could not wait until his return to Washington, Arnold sent a cable to General Marshall: “Operations over Germany conducted here during the past several weeks indicate definitely that we must provide long range fighters to accompany daylight bombardment missions.”<sup>42</sup> Apparently Arnold's eyes were opened by his visits to the operational units because he sent another cable to Marshall, stressing “the necessity of sending the 200 B-17s as planned as the earliest practical moment has been brought out by my visit here.... The total number of B-17s in the Eighth Air Force is less than the total number in the month of July and not sufficient to maintain operations of past strength.”<sup>43</sup> Arnold's visit paid off: he had seen with his own eyes that the original strategy was in great peril and that fighters were vital to any success of the Eighth Air Force.

After three days of very intensive operations with significant losses on October 8, 9 and 10, another strike to Schweinfurt was made on October 14. Again, an epic air battle was fought, in which the Eighth Air Force lost another 60 B-17s. This literally ended belief in the idea that unescorted heavily armed bomber should be able to bomb targets in daylight “without prohibitive losses”. The next day Eaker was obviously shaken when he wrote his proposed doctrinal answers to Arnold:

This does not represent disaster; it does indicate that the air battle has reached its climax. Our answers to this challenge follow:

1. More fighter cover at longer range.
2. Multiple attacks by 7 or 8 Combat Wings of 54 bombers each on different targets widely dispersed, forcing dispersion of enemy defenses.
3. Greater emphasis on counter Air Force operations, striking all fields with mediums and pressing destruction of aircraft factories and repair establishments with heavies.
4. Bomb through the clouds when his fighters will often be fogbound.... This has great possibility as tests and preliminary operations definitely disclose.

Here is what you can do to help:

1. Rush replacement aircraft and crews. We have thus far this month received 143 planes and 143 crews; we must have minimum of 250 planes and crews this month. We shall lose at least 200 this month and we must grow bigger, not smaller.
2. Send every possible fighter here as soon as possible. Especially emphasize earliest arrival of additional P-38's and Mustangs.
3. Give us 5,000 100 gallon and 3,000 150 gallon auxiliary droppable tanks for fighters as soon as possible and continue at that rate monthly.

We must show the enemy we can replace our losses; he knows he cannot replace his. We must continue the battle with unrelenting fury. This we shall do. There is no discouragement here. We are convinced that when the totals are struck yesterday's losses will be far outweighed by the value of the enemy material destroyed.<sup>44</sup>

In his reply Arnold kept up a determined attitude, "We must not only show them that we intend to replace our losses but will send our bombers into Germany with an ever increasing strength; that with our numbers and determination there is nothing the Germans can do which will stop our daylight bombing; that we will change our ideas, our technique, our equipment just as often as is necessary to secure the maximum effort from the airplanes we have available."<sup>45</sup> It is interesting to note that both Eaker and Arnold were now explicitly talking about "replacing losses and numbers"; it had now become an "aerial battle of attrition", as well as a battle of willpower.

Both available fighter types (P-38 and P-47) had range limitations, even with the requested additional fuel tanks. Fortunately, development and production of the P-51 had progressed in recent years in the United States, mainly due to demand by the R.A.F.<sup>46</sup> After several major modifications, including a new Rolls Royce engine and an additional fuel tank, it was ordered in large numbers by the USAAF as well; it soon proved to be the answer that Eaker and his bomber crews desperately were looking for. On December 7, 1943 the first P-51 Group flew an escort mission, and in early 1944 many Fighter Groups entered combat and tipped the balance. In April 1944 they were tasked to not only escort the bombers at altitude, but were free to find their opponents, either in the air or on the ground. This would prove disastrous for the Luftwaffe.<sup>47</sup>

Now encountered everywhere over their own territory, these aerial battles did great damage to the Luftwaffe. Soon, it no longer posed a substantial and constant threat to Allied operations. This enabled the invasion in Normandy and the European campaign afterwards.<sup>48</sup> Eaker was not there to enjoy this success, however. In late 1943 the command structure of the Allied Forces changed significantly. Despite his



almost emotional pleas to be retained,<sup>49</sup> Eaker became Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Air Forces.<sup>50</sup>

### Eaker's legacy of leadership

Eaker had led the Eighth Air Force through very difficult times. Arriving in England, convinced of the “unarmed bomber” strategy, he had to manage the multitude of problems that his organization faced early in its campaign. On the strategic level, Eaker still guided policy making and strategy, even while he was stationed in England. The plan for the Combined Bomber Offensive was his brainchild and he skillfully presented and sold the concept to the British, who were very skeptical at first, and to the decision makers in Washington. He invested much time and effort in the coalition, and kept in close contact, both professionally and personally, with the British political and military leadership. He won the respect and friendship of his British counterparts.

In 2008 the Chief of the Army, General Casey, presented his thoughts on strategic leadership to the students at the U.S. Army War College. He asserted:

....Strategic leaders guide the achievement of their organizational vision .... by directing policy and strategy, building consensus, acquiring and allocating resources, influencing organizational culture, and shaping complex and ambiguous external environments. They lead by example to build effective organizations, grow the next generation of leaders, energize subordinates, seek opportunities .... and balance personal and professional demands.<sup>51</sup>

Eaker fit this profile well; he possessed many apparently timeless strategic leadership traits.

Eaker spent a lot of time keeping up his communications with his own leadership in Washington, with hundreds of personal letters and cables meant to build or strengthen his relations. Eaker's messages convey the broad range of topics that he covered, literally from the overall strategic effort to minute details about the armament of

aircraft types. He spent considerable time and effort trying to acquire adequate resources; this was perhaps his hardest and most difficult ongoing struggle. It is a testament to his determination that his energy never flagged on this front.

Eaker carefully selected commanders and staff officers and went to great lengths to secure high quality personnel, especially for his combat units. He did not hesitate to relieve commanders when necessary and was clear and concise in his demands for their successors, either naming them in person or giving a clear profile which they should meet. At the same time he did not hesitate to rebut criticism about his subordinates when he found it unjust.

Showing that he accepted personal risk and wanted to lead from the front, he flew on the first combat mission of the Eighth Air Force. His frequent visits to combat units insured that he knew first-hand what was happening at the tactical level. Also, Eaker clearly understood the importance of “strategic communication” and was very active in securing ample media coverage for his men and their exploits. There is no doubt that the Eighth Air Force was the best known unit in the Army Air Forces, which greatly helped sustain crew morale when losses were high and replacements slow in arriving.

Perhaps Eaker’s greatest accomplishment though was the agility that he displayed in finding solutions to the operational problems that his Eighth Air Force encountered. While clearly keeping the strategic concept of daylight bombing in focus, he supported ongoing experiments and improvements. New formations and bombing procedures, field modifications to armament and armor of B-17’s and B-24’s and experiments with night operations and radar bombing are just some of many possible

examples. And although he was one of the advocates of the theory of the unescorted bomber, he did not adhere to it mindlessly in the face of the realities his crews faced. While not changing his view immediately, he did so over time and started to place greater emphasis on the availability of fighter escort. He conveyed this message clearly to decision-makers in Washington, and, with the same determination that he displayed in getting more bombers and their crews, tried to get additional fighters to England. His transfer to the Mediterranean theatre prevented him from realizing the rewards of all his hard work for the Eighth Air Force. It is fitting that General Arnold, trying to soothe the blow of his relief of command, wrote to Eaker:

My sincerest appreciation for the record of the Eighth Air Force achieved through your resourceful leadership. Despite the opposition of a strong, determined and experienced enemy air force, your highly successful leveling of so many vital Axis targets have fashioned new and glorious chapters in Aerial Warfare.<sup>52</sup>

It is always difficult to be the first one to command a totally new enterprise, whether it is civilian or military. It is very likely that a conceived strategy will not survive contact with the enemy; therefore an agile and flexible leader will be needed to guide its implementation and adaption to real-life circumstances. To validate its strategic bombing concept the USAAF could not have picked a better leader in 1942 than Ira Eaker.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Air superiority was vital to the success of the Allied ground campaign, and the invasion of Normandy would not have been possible without it. The *United States Strategic Bombing Survey* was established by the Secretary of War on November 3, 1944 to assess the results of the bombing campaigns in Europe and Japan. The European team operated from headquarters in London and later forward and regional headquarters in Germany, immediately following the advance of the Allied armies. Its nearly 1,000 member staff made a close examination of several hundred German plants, cities and areas, gathered large volumes of statistical and

documentary materials, including top German government documents; and conducted interviews and interrogations of thousands of Germans. The entire inventory is now kept at the National Archives in College Park, MD (<http://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/243.html>). The *Overall-report (European War)* was published on September 30, 1945, with detailed appendices following later. Most of the reports can now be accessed online as well, for example at <http://www.iiarchives.net/servlet/documents/usa/103/0>.

<sup>2</sup> Eaker (April 13, 1896 – August 13, 1987) was commissioned in the Army in 1917 and earned his wings in 1919. Various postings to operational units and staffs brought him as a Colonel to Hamilton Field, California when war broke out. In January 1942 he was promoted to Brigadier General, assigned to command Bomber Command of the Eighth Air Force. When Eaker was given command of the Eighth Air Force on December 1, 1942, he was promoted to Major General. In September 1943, when he became commander of all U.S. Air Forces in England, he was promoted to Lieutenant General. James Parton *Air Force Spoken Here* (Adler & Adler, Bethesda MD, 1986) is Eaker's biography, which describes his war years in great detail.

<sup>3</sup> *Initial directive to Bomber Commander in England*, January 31, 1942. Eaker papers, Library of Congress. The majority of Eaker's papers for the period covered in this SRP can be found in boxes I:7 to I:10.

<sup>4</sup> AWPDP is the abbreviation for Air War Plans Division, the branch of the Air Staff responsible for writing the plan. James C. Guston, *Planning the American Air War* (Washington DC, NDU, 1982) and Haywood S. Hansell, *The Air Plan that Defeated Hitler* (Atlanta, Higgins, 1972) give excellent accounts of the inception of AWPDP-1.

<sup>5</sup> Multiple entries from *AWPDP-1*. Copy 2 (Stimson) in Spaatz papers, Box I:65, Library of Congress. The validity of the theory of the unescorted bomber was heavily debated in pre-war years at the Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field, AL. The ultimate authors of AWPDP-1 were all 'bomber' adepts; fierce proponents of (escort) fighters, such as Claire Chennault, were not serving in the Air War Plans Division at the time when AWPDP-1 was written.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939-1945* (HMSO, London, 1961). In this four-volume official history of the Royal Air Force the British strategy and its subsequent choices and operations are covered in great detail.

<sup>7</sup> Multiple entries from *Narrative report of first bombardment mission*, August 19, 1942. Spaatz papers, Library of Congress. The majority of Spaatz's papers for the period covered in this SRP can be found in boxes I:8 to I:14 and I:43.

<sup>8</sup> Eaker to Arnold. Letter August 26, 1942. Eaker papers, Library of Congress. Henry H. ('Hap') Arnold (June 25, 1886 – January 15, 1950) was commissioned from the U.S. Military Academy in 1907. He earned his wings in 1911 as one of the first military aviators. He had a large number of postings in the pre-war years, including one which befriended him with George C. Marshall, who would serve as Chief of the Army in World War II. Although Arnold sided with Billy Mitchell when the latter was court-martialled in 1925 and originally did not get along with President Roosevelt, he was appointed as Chief of the Army Air Force in 1941. The strains of his job and his poor health plagued him, and he suffered a number of heart attacks in the war years. He authored his own memoirs *Global Mission* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1949). His biography is Thomas M. Coffey, *Hap, the story of the USAF and the men who built it* (Viking

Penguin, New York, 1982) and his diary is annotated by John W. Huston, *American Air Power Comes Of Age, General Henry H. Arnold's World War II diaries* (Air University Press, Maxwell AL, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> *AWPD-42*, Copy 11 (Spaatz) in Spaatz papers, Box I:66, Library of Congress. On the original cover note to the Chief of Staff, the required number of fighter aircraft was not even mentioned. It was later added in pencil. On the strategy it mentions that "the air offensive against Germany is a combined effort by the U.S. Army Air Force and the R.A.F. The former will concentrate its efforts upon the systematic destruction of selected vital elements of the German military and industrial machine through precision bombing in daylight. The R.A.F. will concentrate upon mass air attacks of industrial areas at night, to break down morale."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. It also states that: "This condition will materially improve as the German Fighter Force is neutralized or destroyed. Total losses should not exceed 300 bombers and 1,025 fighters." This expected high loss rate for the fighters is not explained in the document.

<sup>12</sup> No doubt the most comprehensive account on the Eighth Air Force is Roger A. Freeman, *The Mighty Eighth* (Doubleday, New York, 1970). A revised edition was published in 2000. Additional, more detailed, information is contained in Freeman's *The Mighty Eighth War Diary* (Jane's, London, 1981) and *The Mighty Eighth War Manual* (Jane's, London, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> LeMay to Major General Robert Olds in a letter of January 12, 1943, quoted in Thomas Coffey, *Iron Eagle* (Crown, New York, 1986), 18. Olds was one of the 'bomber boys' from the pre-war Air Corps Tactical School at Maxwell Field and was held in high regard by all other key players at that time. Health problems kept him from getting a combat command, and he passed away on April 28, 1943. LeMay also alluded to the problems his navigators were having: "At home, a railroad, town, or river is a checkpoint. Here, the landscape is one jumbled mass of railroads, roads and towns and once you lose track of your position, it is almost impossible to find yourself again". And on the gunnery he remarked: "On our arrival here our gunners were very poorly trained. Most of them had not received enough shooting, especially at altitude, to even familiarize themselves with their equipment. We have over here a tow ship and one range for the Wing, but due to weather and missions, the only practice we have had so far is shooting at FW-190s and Me-109s."

<sup>14</sup> John S. Sloan, *The Route as Briefed* (Argus Press, 1946). One of the established gunnery ranges was Snettisham. For some background and photos see <http://www.airfieldinformationexchange.org/community/showthread.php?3516-AAF-Gunnery-School-Snettisham> (accessed on January 10, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> A detailed study of the development of the various B-17 types and their use in combat is Peter M. Bowers, *Fortress in the Sky: Boeing B-17* (Granada Hills, 1976).

<sup>16</sup> On the background of these developments and the various means that were employed, see *report on radar bombing* in Spaatz papers, Box I-80, Library of Congress. It is also thoroughly covered in volumes II (*August 1942 to December 1943, Torch to Pointblank*) and III (*January 1944 to May 1945, Argument to VE-Day*) of Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate's series *The Army Air Forces in World War II* (University of Chicago Press, 1948, 1949). While the

American leadership did not like the term 'blind bombing', it tried to avoid to use it as much as possible.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold to Eaker. Letter December 28, 1942. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>18</sup> In vain, Arnold had written to presidential advisor Harry Hopkins in September 1942: "Everybody, apparently, went with the AWPB-1 plan 100 per cent. .... It was a sound plan. Everybody who read it seemed to be for initially. Soon we started to tear it to pieces, a couple of groups here, a couple of groups there.... As a result we find our Air Force today fighting in 7 theaters and operating in 13 theaters. In every one of those theaters the local commander demands ever increasing numbers of planes to insure superiority in the air.... Little by little our Air Plan has been torn to pieces and today we find that instead of being able to send 2,000 or 3,000 airplanes against Germany from bases in England, we end up with less than 1,000 bomber if present plans are consummated and if this continued dispersion is not stopped."

Arnold to Hopkins. Letter September 3, 1942. Spaatz papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>19</sup> His closing paragraph of that letter read: "Please do not let anybody sell you the idea that we are down-hearted, dispirited, discouraged by our losses, or that we are sitting on our hands. As long as we have one bomber left it will be busily engaged in operating against the enemy according to the directive. The success of our effort is wholly dependent upon the volume of that effort. As fast as you can send us bombers, we will get them into the fight. The more the better! Of course you know this as well as I do."

Multiple entries from: Eaker to Arnold. Letter January 11, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>20</sup> See among others Williamson Murray and Alan Millett "Combined Bomber Offensive, 1941-1945" in *War to be won: fighting the Second World War* (University of Harvard Press, Cambridge MA, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> *The Combined Bomber Offensive from the U.K.*, April 13, 1943. Spaatz papers, Box 67, Library of Congress.

<sup>22</sup> Eaker to Arnold. Letter January 30, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>23</sup> Multiple entries from: Eaker to Arnold. Letter February 15, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>24</sup> *305<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Narrative of Operations April 4, 1943*, LtCol John H. DeRussy. Accessed on-line at <http://news.webshots.com/photo/2928775930044116616BVRQzu> on November 24, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Multiple entries from: Eaker to Johnson. Letter April 21, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>26</sup> Multiple entries from: Eaker to Arnold, Letter July 31, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress. Eaker was writing about LtCol Arman Peterson, Commanding Officer of the 78<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group who was lost over the Dutch coast on July 1. Eaker wrote about him "I was quite

certain that he was to be the Rickenbacker of this war. He really had what it takes to be a flaming leader and an incomparable fighting man.”

<sup>27</sup> Eaker to Arnold. Letter April 16, 1943, Eaker papers Library of Congress. Overacker's replacement was Colonel Frank P. Armstrong. Although fictitious, the book *Twelve o'clock high* (Harper & Brothers, New York/London, 1948) by Sy Bartlett and Beirne Lay Jr. describes Armstrong's efforts to rejuvenate the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group.

<sup>28</sup> Arnold to Eaker. Cable June 10, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold to Eaker. Letter June 15, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>30</sup> Eaker to Arnold. Letter June 29, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>31</sup> Eaker to Stimson. Letter August 24, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>32</sup> Eaker to Arnold. Letter August 12, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress. Eaker was a prolific writer in the pre-war years. This may have helped him to appreciate the importance of publicity.

<sup>33</sup> *Killing civilian population in occupied territory*. Memo to Commanding General VIII Bomber Command. July 28, 1943. Spaatz papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>34</sup> The United States Middle East Air Force was re-designated the Ninth Air Force on November 12, 1942. It consisted of fighter, troop carrier and both medium and heavy bomber units. For its mission to the oil refineries in Ploesti, Rumania, on August 1, 1943 all three B-24 Bomb Groups of the Eighth Air Force were detached to North Africa. In October 1943 the Ninth Air Force was relocated to England in anticipation of the invasion. Its bomber component was to consist of medium bombers only; the medium bombers of the Eighth Air Force were reassigned to the Ninth.

<sup>35</sup> Eaker to Arnold. Letter July 18, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>36</sup> The famous Ploesti mission is covered in detail in several books. The history of the three Eighth Air Force B-24 Groups that took part is captured in their post-war histories. Most details on their North African detachment are found in Carroll Stewart, *Teds Travelling Circus, 93<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Group, World War II* (Sun/World Communications, Lincoln NE, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> Assistant Chief of the Air Staff, Intelligence Section: *Interview with Brigadier General H.S. Hansell*, 9 August 1943, file 142052 AFHRA, Maxwell AFB, AL.

<sup>38</sup> Multiple entries from: Ibid, page 9.

<sup>39</sup> The best book on this mission is Martin Middlebrook, *The Schweinfurt/Regensburg Mission: American Raids on August 17, 1943*, (London, Cassell, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> H.H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1949), 444.

<sup>41</sup> Robert J. Mrazek, *To Kingdom Come* (Penguin, New York, 2011) asserts that the mission at least partially was flown to impress Arnold, who had been critical about the lack of 'bombers

employed' so far. If this is true, it failed in its purpose as Arnold remained critical on this issue and blamed Eaker for it. There are several references to this in his memoir *Global Mission* (p 450, 472-473).

<sup>42</sup> Arnold to Marshall. Cable September 3, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>43</sup> Arnold to Marshall. Cable September 3, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>44</sup> Eaker to Arnold. Cable October 15, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>45</sup> Arnold to Eaker. Cable October 15, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>46</sup> Bernard L. Boylan, *The Development of the American Long Range Escort Fighter* (University of Missouri, 1955) gives a detailed account of this subject.

<sup>47</sup> Williamson Murray, *Strategy For Defeat: the Luftwaffe, 1933-1945* (Air University Press, Maxwell AL, 1983) is an excellent study on the rise and the demise of the Luftwaffe.

<sup>48</sup> On the evaluation of the Allied bombing strategy, and especially the gradual U.S. switch away from "precision" bombing and toward "area" bombing in the later part of the war, see Tami D. Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Eaker to Arnold. Cable December 19, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress. It reads in part: "Believe war interest best served by my retention command Eighth Air Force. Otherwise experience this theatre for nearly two year wasted. If I am to be allowed any personal preference having started with the Eighth and seen it organized for major task in this theatre it would be heartbreaking to leave just before climax."

<sup>50</sup> Cable Dec 231738Z '43. Eaker papers, Library of Congress. For more details on this important change of command, see Richard G. Davis, *Carl A. Spaatz and the Air War in Europe* (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1992), 270-280.

<sup>51</sup> General George Casey, presentation at USAWC September 22, 2008. Quoted in Gerras, Stephen J., *Strategic Leadership Primer, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition*, USAWC, Carlisle PA, ny, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Arnold to Eaker. Letter December 26, 1943. Eaker papers, Library of Congress.